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El Salvador's Insurgents: Key Capabilities and Vulnerabilities

An Intelligence Assessment

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El Salvador's Insurgents: Key Capabilities and Vulnerabilities

Key Judgments

Information available as of 5 June 1990 was used in this report.

The insurgents of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) at present have neither the military strength nor sufficient political support to seize power in El Salvador, and their prospects for doing so appear to be declining. FMLN manpower—perhaps the most straightforward measure of the insurgency's well-being—has remained at 6,000 to 7,000 combatants since 1986, down from a peak of about 12,000 in 1984. The insurgents increasingly have to rely on forced conscription to fill their ranks. Since the mid-1980s the FMLN has adapted to the shrinkage of its forces and increasing vulnerability to government operations by deploying smaller, more mobile units that engage in low-risk guerrilla tactics, such as economic sabotage, assassinations, ambushes, and harassments. Although the FMLN is likely to attempt another series of large-scale urban attacks before the end of 1990, we do not believe it can sustain such actions long enough to present a military threat to the government. Instead, the insurgents hope these highly visible tactics will demonstrate their continued military effectiveness, while demoralizing the armed forces, undermining the government's legitimacy, and boosting the FMLN's political standing.

The FMLN's domestic popularity also appears to have declined substantially since the early 1980s. Its long-sought "popular insurrection" failed to materialize in November 1989 as planned, and rebel-orchestrated demonstrations repeatedly have failed to attract widespread support. Indeed, polling data indicate public impatience with leftist violence and damage to the economy contributed to the conservative ARENA Party's victory in the March 1989 presidential election. In a March 1990 opinion poll, moreover, 55 percent of respondents believed the FMLN was the group that least respected human rights compared with 12 percent who cited the Salvadoran Army.

With the ouster of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the wide-ranging reforms in the Soviet Union, the Marxist rebels also find themselves more isolated internationally. The rebels, who have been heavily dependent on Nicaragua for supplies and other support, face potentially serious problems in the wake of the Sandinistas' electoral defeat. Although we believe Cuba and Sandinista loyalists will continue to

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aid the FMLN, their inability to operate openly in Nicaragua under the Chamorro government could result in fewer, less regular supply shipments. The FMLN already has moved some of its administrative facilities from Nicaragua to Mexico, and the five top rebel commanders reportedly have left Managua to establish new residences—possibly in Mexico, Cuba, or El Salvador.

These myriad pressures also appear to be exacerbating existing divisions and power struggles within the FMLN's coalition of five factions, and undoubtedly will hinder its ability to devise and pursue a coherent strategy. In our view, the FMLN's growing isolation—and inability to seize power in its 1989 offensive—may be prompting some insurgent leaders to consider serious negotiations with the government. Disagreements over such fundamental issues as participating in negotiations and elections already have spawned maverick operations by rogue FMLN groups and, if unchecked, could result in a splintering of the movement.

Nonetheless, the FMLN continues to pose serious problems for the government. The war forces the government to maintain a large standing Army, hampers the development of democratic institutions, aggravates economic problems, and contributes to the political polarization of the society. Moreover, the rebels' ability to operate relatively freely in the capital helps depict the government as ineffectual and helpless. Systematic attacks on mayors and other elected officials undermine government authority and, in effect, "annul" election results. Sabotage of the economic infrastructure—bridges, dams, and the electrical power grid—and the disruption of businesses are battering an economy already plagued by low growth, limited investment, high levels of unemployment and underemployment, and bureaucratic mismanagement. The direct and indirect costs of the war are only barely offset by foreign—primarily US—economic assistance.

We believe the government will be able to manage these problems, unless unexpected events—such as a cutoff of US military aid or collapse of public support for the government—lead to a drastic decline in armed forces performance. Insurgent capabilities, on the other hand, would be seriously weakened in the unlikely cases that the FMLN and Cuba were unable to adjust to the loss of access to Nicaraguan territory, Cuba were to withdraw its support for the rebels, or the FMLN were to splinter.

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Scope Note

This paper examines the insurgency in El Salvador, with emphasis on the nature of the insurgent challenge in 1990, on the rebels' objectives and strategy, and on their present strengths and exploitable weaknesses. It discusses three critical aspects of the insurgency: its forces and leadership, its logistic and external support network, and its popular support base. Finally, it assesses prospects for changes in the rebels' capabilities and vulnerabilities.

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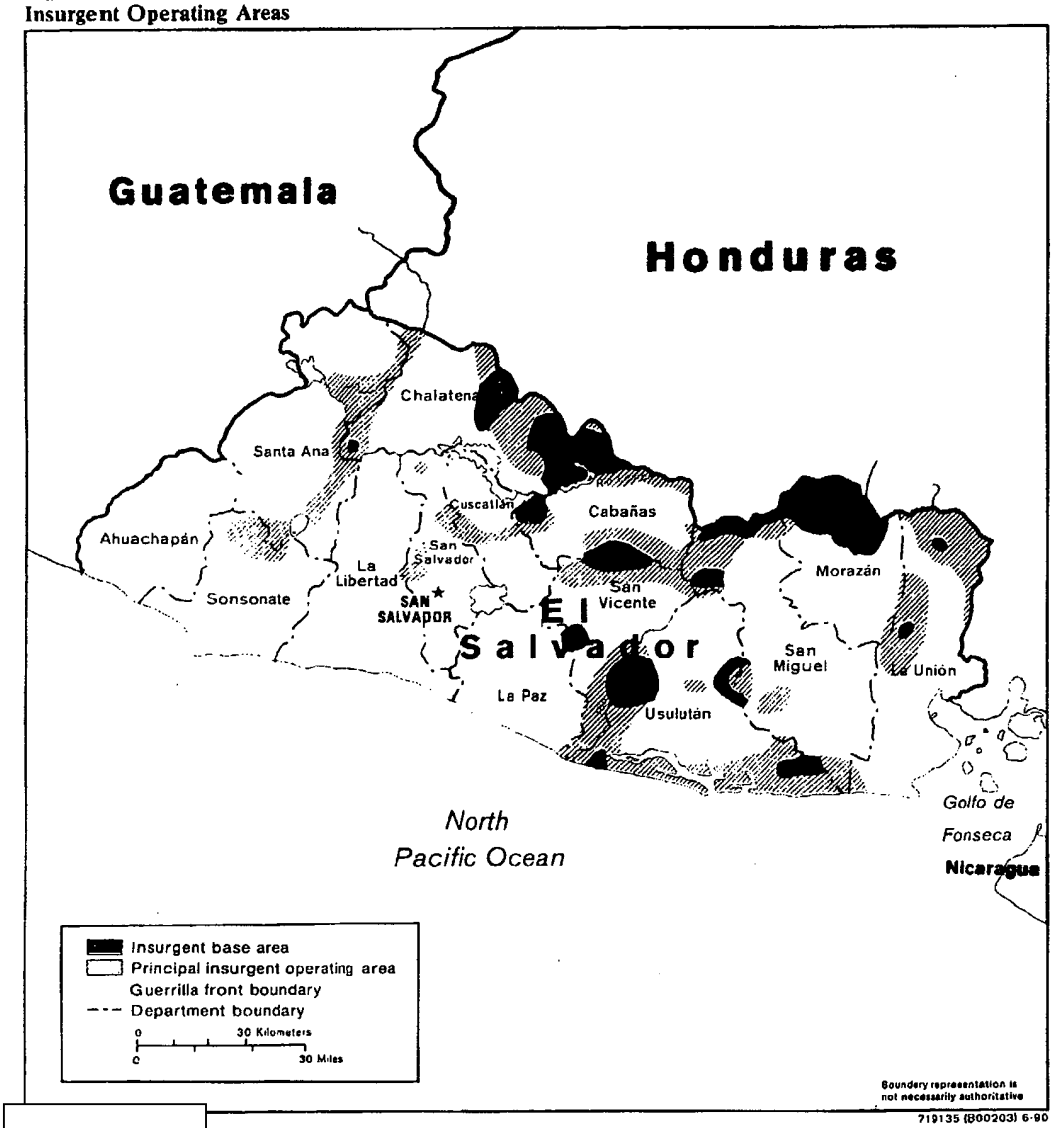
Figure 1
Insurgent Operating Areas



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El Salvador's Insurgents: Key Capabilities and Vulnerabilities

Introduction

The Marxist insurgents of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN)—a coalition of five distinct groups—were able to confront the Salvadoran Army on nearly equal military terms during the early 1980s, occasionally seizing and occupying government bases. FMLN fortunes on the battlefield began to wane in the second half of the decade, however, when US assistance to San Salvador improved the effectiveness of the armed forces. At the same time, the evolution of democratic institutions enhanced the government's credibility among Salvadorans and began to undercut the insurgents' political appeal. The FMLN's all-out offensive in November 1989—its largest military operation to date—underscored the insurgents' military and logistic capabilities, but also served to highlight some fundamental weaknesses in both the political and military spheres. As a result of these factors—as well as changes taking place in the Communist world—the FMLN appears to be giving negotiations with the government a higher priority, while nonetheless continuing to pursue a military strategy.

Status of the Insurgency

The extraordinary effort the guerrillas expended during the offensive in 1989 did not appreciably alter the nature of the war at the tactical level, and the FMLN operates today in El Salvador much as it has for the past several years. The approximately 6,000- to 7,000-man Marxist insurgency is active in rural and urban areas throughout much of the country and has a particularly strong presence in eastern and central El Salvador, including the capital and its surroundings. Although their urban infrastructure was damaged seriously in the offensive, the rebels can still operate in the cities and already are in the process of rebuilding their urban networks.

Practicing classic guerrilla warfare, the rebels operate mostly in small, highly mobile groups and usually avoid contact with government forces except when they enjoy a numerical advantage. Most operations are ambushes, raids, or harassments of lightly defended military targets, economic sabotage, or political assassinations. The rebels' key bases are along the northern border with Honduras, where they have established temporary camps—relocated every month or two for security reasons—large supply caches, training facilities, and an extensive support network among the local civilian population.

Insurgent Goals and Strategy

A review of information from a variety of sources indicates the FMLN's ultimate objective remains the establishment of a one-party state modeled after Cuba. Although their goal has remained constant, rebel leaders have adjusted their strategy and tactics over the years in response to changing military and political circumstances. We believe the insurgents hope to weaken and topple the government either by forcing it into a power-sharing arrangement or by sparking a popular insurrection. Under circumstances of power sharing, the FMLN's plans apparently call for slowly expanding its control over critical sectors by undermining and eventually purging its coalition partners. If fomenting an insurrection proved successful, the rebels believe that newly "radicalized" Salvadorans, led by the FMLN vanguard, would rise up and help sweep the government from power after a coordinated campaign of widespread violence, propaganda, and economic sabotage.

Political Warfare

Since its formation in 1980 the FMLN has displayed a keen appreciation for the political dimension of the war. As the rebels' prospects for military victory

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Government Counterinsurgency Strategy

We believe the 56,000-strong Salvadoran armed forces are pursuing an effective strategy to wear down the Marxist rebels and foster political and social development. The strategy combines military operations designed to enhance internal security and destroy the insurgent infrastructure with propaganda and civic action designed to discredit the FMLN and win popular support for the government. Although implementation of this strategy sometimes is flawed, we believe, on balance, the armed forces are making definite—albeit slow—progress.

On the battlefield, the armed forces emphasize small-unit and night operations, particularly those targeting the FMLN leadership.

he Army may have killed as many as five FMLN commanders in a six-week period in mid-1989, but they have yet to kill or capture any senior factional leaders—who normally reside in Managua. The armed forces' performance remains spotty, however, with some commanders and units having adopted a "business as usual" approach to the war, and with special operations units or commandos accounting for the majority of insurgents killed. Although small unit tactics have proved effective against the rebels, they have been risky when employed in FMLN base areas where the insurgents can quickly mass an overwhelming force.

More officers—particularly some key commanders—increasingly recognize the political nature of the war, while being content to confine themselves to an apolitical role. Commanders throughout the country are emphasizing the importance of expanding popular support for the government, and the armed forces remain critical players in civic action and psychological operations. At the same time, corruption, human rights abuses, or crime by Army personnel—although not sanctioned by higher authority—detract from the government's hard-won gains and can translate into a propaganda windfall for the FMLN.

Figure 2. FMLN activist spray paints antigovernment slogan on a wall in the capital.

diminished in the mid-1980s, they placed even greater emphasis on political and diplomatic activities.

The insurgents currently are pursuing several political objectives:

- To expand their support base—domestically and internationally—through the activities of front groups and civilian backers and through military and civic action operations that demonstrate the FMLN's viability.
- To discredit the government and the armed forces—particularly in the eyes of the US Congress and international public opinion—by portraying them through provocation and propaganda as antidemocratic, repressive, and contemptuous of human rights.
- To engage the government in negotiations under terms favorable to the insurgents and to extract key concessions that divide the government, undermine its legitimacy, and enhance rebel prestige.
- To force the severing of US security and economic assistance to the government

The rebels attempt to gain popular support through an elaborate network of front groups involved mostly in social welfare activities. These groups try to encourage antigovernment sentiment and attract international support for the insurgent cause. The FMLN also conducts political indoctrination and civic action exercises in areas it controls; in April 1989 in a remote village in San Miguel Department the insurgents staged a soccer game, held a cookout—the civilians were required to provide the meat and corn—and gave the villagers rudimentary military training.

Propaganda and public relations are key tactics in the rebels' political strategy—particularly in the international arena—and often keep the government on the diplomatic defensive. For example, during its offensive in 1989, the FMLN fed exaggerated reports of indiscriminate bombing by the Salvadoran Air Force to the press and pressure groups in the United States. In addition, the FMLN judiciously calls for negotiations and frequently presents "new peace proposals" designed to curry international favor and to coax the government into negotiations on the rebels' terms.

The FMLN often is able to score international propaganda points by taking advantage of government missteps, particularly human rights abuses by the military. The rebels, for example, have had some success depicting the government of President Alfredo Cristiani as "repressive"—particularly to foreign audiences already suspicious of the conservative administration in San Salvador—despite the fact that human rights abuses attributable to the armed forces have not increased since he took office in June 1989. Nevertheless, the murder of six Jesuit priests by Army personnel and other events surrounding the late-1989 offensive have provided grist for the FMLN's propaganda mill—which is far more effective than any government body at disseminating information. Such propaganda appears less effective on the home front, however. In a March 1990 public opinion poll, 55 percent of the respondents said the FMLN was the group that least respected human rights, while 12 percent named the armed forces.

Military Strategy

Despite its attention to political activities and a new emphasis on negotiations, the FMLN, in our view, still sees military action as a critical component of its strategy. Most insurgent commanders apparently believe that, at a minimum, continued military activity is necessary to lend credibility to their political agenda and to strengthen their bargaining position, while others reportedly favor the continued pursuit of an outright military victory. The rebels' decision during the period 1988-89 to rearm many of their units with Soviet-style weapons—a massive undertaking—is an indication, for instance, of the FMLN's long-term commitment to military operations.

The FMLN's military operations have evolved over the years from direct confrontation with government troops to a greater emphasis on guerrilla warfare. Following the buildup of the Salvadoran military in the early 1980s, the insurgents reorganized into small units to avoid exposing the core of their forces to the armed forces' superior firepower—especially air attack. Their strategy then focused on prolonging the war through low-risk guerrilla actions in the hope

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The Insurgents and Negotiations

The FMLN and the Government of El Salvador in Mr. 1990 once again embarked on a series of negotiations to end the war, this time under the auspices of the United Nations. The two sides have held peace talks periodically since 1984, but progress repeatedly has been stymied by intransigence on both sides. The FMLN traditionally has used negotiations as a ploy to gain tactical advantages, although changing circumstances may have persuaded some rebel leaders to take a more serious approach.

The insurgents in the past have used proposals containing elements they believe are unacceptable to the government or the armed forces—such as abrogating the Constitution, political power sharing, or reconfiguring the military—in an attempt to seize the diplomatic initiative, while casting the government as obstructionist and "antipeace." Indeed, some past rebel proposals appeared designed to be rejected, and we believe they were issued principally for propaganda purposes. More recently, however, the FMLN has dropped some of its more controversial preconditions and instead is focusing on issues such as reforming the judiciary and the military—areas that also are a priority for the Cristiani administration.

Regardless of their specific proposals, the FMLN's bargaining position has weakened considerably during the past year. The rebels have experienced substantial reverses militarily, lost a major patron, and witnessed a free election in which their allies were soundly repudiated. Moreover, the Cristiani administration is apt to be highly skeptical of FMLN intentions on dialogue, pointing to the rebels' active preparation for the late-1989 offensive even while negotiations were under way in Mexico and San Jose.

Despite disagreements among the FMLN leadership over the efficacy of negotiations, the rebels have little choice but to remain—publicly, at least—receptive to dialogue and may propose more down-scaled demands intended primarily for foreign consumption. While some insurgent leaders eventually may calculate that talks would be a face-saving way to withdraw from the war, we believe other, more militant elements would resist any negotiated settlement except on their own terms, however. If negotiations already under way turn to the insurgents' disadvantage, we would expect them to stage a provocative event—as when they murdered prominent leftist Herbert Anaya during talks in 1987—blame the killing on Army or rightist death squads, and withdraw under charges the government is repressive and acting in bad faith. Given the high level of commitment of insurgent leaders, it is unlikely they would, after 10 years of war, settle for such minor concessions as the dismissal of a handful of Army officers.

that, over time, conditions would shift in their favor. Although the insurgents occasionally massed their forces to assault major Army bases, since 1987 they have favored less risky standoff bombardments with mortars or rockets. During this time period they also have worked to expand their presence in urban areas—reflecting both a deliberate strategy and their weakness on the open battlefield—which has led to an increase in assassinations, bombings, and other terrorist-type attacks.

The FMLN's offensive of November 1989, unprecedented in scope, was intended to cause the collapse of the government, in our judgment. The rebels, apparently believing both political and military conditions favored them, sought to destroy the government's political and military leadership, cripple the armed forces, and incite a popular insurrection. When the

offensive failed to meet those objectives, the rebels resumed low-risk operations, such as ambushes and harassments, while they regrouped and reassessed their strategy.

The rebels' acquisition of SA-7 surface-to-air missiles in late 1989 indicates that—at a minimum—they have contingency plans to again escalate military attacks. During a concerted attack on a key military target, the insurgents could use the SA-7s to stave off aerial counterattacks, thus improving their chances for success. To date, the rebels have used the missiles sparingly—and without success—suggesting that they have only a few of the weapons or that they are being held in reserve for another large-scale offensive.

Insurgent Forces

To carry out military operations, each of the FMLN's five factions maintains its own "armed forces." A variety of non-Salvadorans—mostly other Latin Americans and Europeans—also reportedly serve in leadership, combat, and support roles. The insurgent "armies" generally are composed of four types of units:

- *Special forces*, totaling about 400 to 500 for all factions, are the FMLN's elite troops. Well trained and well equipped, they generally are used against targets of strategic importance, such as major military installations. They also conduct reconnaissance and reportedly help protect senior rebel commanders.

- *Strategic forces*, numbering about 1,500 to 1,700, are the FMLN's primary offensive combat units. Composed of full-time insurgents and support personnel, these forces usually remain within an assigned regional front—the Eastern, Western, Central, or Paracentral—but also can operate nationwide.

- *Local forces*, totaling about 3,300 to 3,800, generally conduct basic military-political actions, such as ambushes, sabotage, or distribution of propaganda. They also are responsible for expanding the FMLN's control and influence in a specific zone within a front.

- *Local militia*, numbering about 700 to 900, are the FMLN's least effective forces. They normally remain near their villages, conducting rudimentary operations. As part-time combatants—usually with little training and second-rate equipment—the militia apparently are viewed by the FMLN leadership as an expedient source of recruits for reinforcing or restaffing existing units.

The FMLN's unarmed civilian supporters, the *masas* (the masses), help transport supplies, serve as couriers and collect intelligence. The *masas* range from long-time supporters to individuals forced to assist the FMLN on a one-time basis; they also participate in political activities and provide rebel combatants with food, shelter, and other necessities.

Recruitment and Morale

Recruits join the FMLN for a variety of reasons: ideological commitment, resentment against the government or armed forces, family or community pressures, adventure, or, probably in the cases of some jobless youth, simply a lack of alternatives. For others, the insurgency offers potential benefits of a more immediate nature. Many rebels captured during the 1989 offensive, for instance, report they were enticed into battle not by the prospect of ushering in a new political-economic system, but by promises of good jobs and new cars.

Recent reporting indicates the FMLN is having increasing difficulty obtaining voluntary recruits. In recent years, manpower shortages apparently have prompted the insurgents to recruit more children and

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Figure 3. The FMLN often uses children in combat roles.

teenagers, who generally are more easily indoctrinated than older combatants

Although government estimates are somewhat higher, we believe the FMLN lost about 1,500 fighters during the offensive; most of the casualties apparently were poorly trained new recruits. Those forcibly recruited reportedly tend to perform poorly in battle and often desert. Nevertheless, we believe they can be used in simple sabotage or harassment missions that make it appear as if the FMLN has a significant presence throughout the country.

Battlefield reversals and heavy casualties apparently have affected morale throughout FMLN ranks.

Command, Control, and Coordination

The FMLN's overall system of command and control generally functions well. Indeed, we believe the military skills and political commitment of the insurgents' leadership cadre are the key to the FMLN's staying power. The FMLN maintains a joint general command still based in Managua, while each faction has its own central command structure. The rebels have also formed a joint political-military commission to devise policy on issues of common concern. Orders or guidance typically are passed to the regional or front commanders and down the chain of command to leaders of local guerrilla units or urban commando cells. More routine operations can originate with the local commander. The FMLN's command structure generally appears able to coordinate successfully operations involving more than one of the five factions. A senior rebel captured in 1989 has reported that units of different factions' special forces often conduct joint operations and even integrate their forces down to the squad level. (S NF)

Command and control over the urban commandos, however, is sometimes a problem for the FMLN. Urban forces normally operate with virtual autonomy and, for security reasons, rarely communicate with the high command.

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Although the joint command structure is generally effective, differences among the factions do exist and at times have contributed to poor coordination and lost opportunities at the tactical level.

Some of these difficulties were apparent during the 1989 offensive. Although the FMLN apparently had coordinated well in the planning stage, it had some difficulties sustaining coordination once the fighting began. The joint command succeeded in mobilizing all five factions, in carrying out operations in most parts of the country, and in staging a series of nearly simultaneous actions in the capital.

The FMLN's inability to unify its five component groups has, in our view, hampered efforts to define and implement some key aspects of its strategy. Disagreement over whether to boycott the presidential election in 1989 no doubt caused confusion among both rank-and-file rebels and front groups, and some insurgent commanders reportedly already are debating how to react to local elections scheduled for 1991.

Insurgent Logistics

Throughout the war the FMLN has maintained a well-developed, reasonably secure logistic network using mainly external sources of supply. We believe the system's greatest strengths have been its flexibility, redundancy, and compartmentalization, which have ensured reliability and security.

The FMLN now faces a more fundamental problem in adjusting to the potential loss or reduction of their use of Nicaraguan territory as a supply base and safehaven.

External Support

Despite claims that they are self-sufficient, the insurgents have depended heavily on external assistance, including war materiel, communications support, training, funding, and safehaven, since at least 1979. The decision in late 1988 to refit mainline FMLN forces with Soviet-style weapons, including AK-47 and AKM assault rifles, Dragunov sniper rifles, RPK machineguns, and RPG-7 and -18 rocket launchers, further increased the insurgents' reliance on external assistance. These weapons, along with ammunition and spare parts, must all be smuggled in from outside. We believe the FMLN opted for the Soviet-style arms because of its inability to capture sufficient Western-made rifles and ammunition from the armed forces and the ready availability of Cuban-manufactured ammunition for the AK rifles.

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The Sandinista loss in the Nicaraguan election may force the FMLN to revamp its external support network, but does not appear to have crippled the insurgents. Support from Nicaragua appeared to be largely unaffected as of President Chamorro's inauguration in late April 1990, and continued Sandinista control of the military and security services could enable them to maintain support to the FMLN without the Chamorro government's knowledge or approval. The FMLN already conducts resupply operations and other clandestine activities in Honduras, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Mexico without the approval of the governments in those countries. Nonetheless, the Sandinistas may reduce the levels of assistance in order to be more discreet. At a minimum, Chamorro probably will press FMLN elements in Managua to adopt a lower profile to avoid antagonizing Washington and to appear to be in compliance with regional agreements prohibiting support to subversive movements.

We believe Cuba eventually will seek new ways of delivering munitions to the FMLN. Havana may try to ferry supplies by sea to Mexico, or along Central America's long coastline to points where cargo could then be transported to El Salvador. For critical payloads, the Cubans may attempt aerial resupply. The FMLN also may be forced to find a new safehaven for its leadership, communications network, and training and administration facilities that had been located in Nicaragua.

Other foreign countries and groups also have aided the FMLN, though to a far lesser degree than Cuba and Nicaragua.

The FMLN's Non-Communist Political Ally

Formed in 1980, the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR) was originally composed of three non-Marxist social democratic groups: the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), the Popular Socialist Christian Movement (MPSC), and the now moribund Independent Movement of Salvadoran Professionals (MIPTES). The FDR allied itself with the FMLN in 1981, and during the early 1980s was instrumental in attracting international support to the insurgents. FDR influence within the movement has waned, however, and today relations between the two allies are strained. Tensions flared in late 1988 and early 1989, when—despite the opposition of some FMLN commanders—the MNR and MPSC entered into an electoral coalition to participate in the presidential election. As of early 1990 elements of the FDR were functioning as legal political parties without formally severing their ties to the FMLN.

Insurgent Equipment

FMLN combatants usually are armed with standard Western or Soviet-model military small arms. The typical rebel weapon is a 5.56-mm or 7.62-mm automatic assault rifle—most commonly, US-made M-16s, Israeli Galils, AK-47s, AKMs, West German G-3s, or Belgian FALs. The rebels also have a variety of handguns, submachineguns, and other types of small arms, such as M-1/M-2 carbines, hunting rifles, and shotguns. For heavier weapons, they have 7.62-mm M-60 and Soviet-style RPK light machineguns, .30 caliber and .50 caliber machineguns, 40-mm M-79 grenade launchers, a variety of rocket launchers—including the US-made LAW and Soviet designed RPG-2, RPG-7, and RPG-18—recoilless rifles, and 60-mm, 81-mm, and possibly 120-mm mortars. Since late 1989 the FMLN also has had an unknown number of SA-7 surface-to-air missiles, although the rebels have failed to down any aircraft with these weapons. For tactical communications, the insurgents use mostly sophisticated Japanese Yaesu radios and captured US-made PRC-77 field radios.

The FMLN also depends on foreign financing.

Domestic Sources of Supply

The insurgents obtain additional material support—voluntary and coerced—from civilians in El Salvador.

In addition to purchases made with funds obtained abroad, nonmilitary supplies are bought openly with "war taxes," that is, money obtained through robberies, extortion, or ransoms from kidnappings. The rebels also continue to capture some weapons and equipment from military or civil defense units and are able to manufacture homemade items, such as landmines and even simple mortars.

The Struggle for Popular Support

We believe the FMLN's ability to attract popular support has declined during the 1980s, in large part because of the improved performance of the Salvadoran Government. Jose Napoleon Duarte's victory in the presidential election in 1984, the first democratic election for president in more than 50 years, and the subsequent reduction in human rights abuses improved the government's popular standing and enhanced its legitimacy. The March 1989 presidential

Figure 4. Insurgents examine an M-60 machinegun; note AK-47s in background.

election and peaceful transfer of power to Alfredo Cristiani further underscored the evolution of the Salvadoran political process. We believe the legitimacy afforded the government—along with the FMLN's own excesses—has helped turn the tide of public opinion in El Salvador against the rebels. Even on issues in which there is widespread disapproval of government policies—controlling inflation, for example—the opposition does not translate into active support for the insurgents. Recent events and public opinion polls support this view:

- Nearly 55 percent of eligible voters defied FMLN threats and voted in the 1989 presidential election. Although the participation rate was lower than in previous elections, parties clearly linked to the insurgents received less than 4 percent of the votes.
- In a CID/Gallup poll conducted in March 1990, 64 percent of the respondents blamed the FMLN, Cuba, or Nicaragua for the continuation of the civil war, compared with the 6 percent who blamed either the government or the Salvadoran armed forces.
- Contrary to rebel plans and expectations, Salvadorans declined to heed the rebels' call for an insurrection during the November 1989 offensive. Indicative of—as well as part of the reason for—the offensive's failure were the results of a December 1989 public opinion poll, in which 81 percent of Salvadorans from across the socioeconomic spectrum rated government performance as either "good" or "excellent."

These polls suggest that the FMLN's front groups, despite their visibility, have been unable to expand the rebels' political base significantly. The public, in fact, often ignores their calls for demonstrations and other activities. The FMLN-controlled National Unity of Salvadoran Workers, for example, hoped to attract at least 25,000 participants to antigovernment activities on May Day 1989, but fewer than 4,000 actually attended. Although the turnout for antigovernment protests on May Day 1990 was much better—an estimated 25,000 to 30,000—most of the participants were affiliated with prodemocratic labor unions or other groups critical of various government policies but not supportive of the FMLN. The effectiveness of the front groups was reduced even more by the November offensive. Many front group members were publicly exposed as pro-FMLN activists, at least temporarily crippling the

Selected Insurgent Front Groups

AGEUS	*General Association of Salvadoran University Students*	*FENASTRAS*	*National Federation of Salvadoran Workers Unions*
CDHES	*Non-Governmental Human Rights Commission of El Salvador*	*FERS*	*Federation of Salvadoran Revolutionary Students*
COACES	*Confederation of Cooperative Associations of El Salvador*	*FES*	*Federation of Secondary School Students*
CODEFAM	*Committee of Families for the Freedom for Political Prisoners and the Disappeared of El Salvador–Marianela Garcia Villas*	*FESTRAS*	*Trade Union Federation of Salvadoran Workers*
		FSR	*Revolutionary Trade Union Federation*
COMADRES	*Committee of Mothers and Families of Political Prisoners, the Disappeared, and Assassinated of El Salvador–Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero*	*FUT*	*United Front of Workers*
		MPTL	*Movement for Bread, Land, Work, and Liberty*
COMAFAC	*Committee of Mothers and Families of Political Prisoners, the Disappeared, Assassinated of El Salvador–Father Octavio Ortiz-Hermana Silvia*	*MSC*	*Movement of Salvadoran Children*
		MSM	*Movement of Salvadoran Women*
		STISSS	*Social Security Institute Workers Union*
CRIPDES	*Christian Committee for the Displaced of El Salvador*	*UNC*	*National Campesino Union*
CST	*Coordinator for Workers Solidarity*	*UNTS*	*National Unity of Salvadoran Workers, the FMLN's umbrella labor organization*
FEASIES	*Federation of Independent Unions Association of El Salvador*	*UU*	*University Unity*
FECMAFAM	*Federation of Committees of Mothers and Families of Political Prisoners, the Disappeared, and Assassinated-Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero*		

FMLN's political apparatus in the capital.

The FMLN's Marxist ideology probably plays a limited role in winning domestic support for the group. Ideological fervor—in most cases, we believe, leavened by personal ambition—probably is confined mostly to the FMLN leadership, although report that all recruits receive a stiff dose of indoctrination. In our view, most voluntary support for the insurgents—like the motives of volunteer recruits—appears based on more general or personal factors, such as resentment of Army or rightist abuses or social inequities. Despite its inability to attract broad popular support, the insurgency remains the dominant political force in many remote areas where the government has no effective presence. Filling a void left by years of neglect by San Salvador, the rebels take advantage of the tradition of political apathy or antigovernment sentiment and focus on indoctrinating the local population and binding them to the insurgent cause. The repatriation last year of approximately 13,000 Salvadoran refugees from Honduras—many of whom already were pro-FMLN and returned to participate in the November 1989 offensive—has also provided the insurgents with additional opportunities to expand their local support bases.

As the insurgents' popular support—and their prospects for military success—have declined, they have increasingly used force and intimidation to obtain recruits and other support from the civilian population, which generally has no choice but to accede. The FMLN's popular standing also is limited by the rebels' penchant for high-visibility, low-risk operations, such as assassinations, economic sabotage, and attacks on urban targets. Although intended to assert the rebels' military effectiveness, these tactics often harm the civilian population and leave the FMLN open to charges of terrorism. The insurgents' failure to claim responsibility for many of these actions underscores their own concern about negative publicity.

The problem is particularly acute for insurgents operating in San Salvador. The FMLN believes the densely populated capital offers the best arena in which to "radicalize" the civilian populace through well-chosen military, political, and propaganda activities and to draw the attention of the international media and the diplomatic community. But this high degree of visibility can also turn against the urban guerrillas when they miscalculate or bungle an operation. Their assassination of Minister of the Presidency Rodriguez Porth in 1989, for example, was widely condemned as an act of wanton terrorism.

Prospects

Still a Force To Be Reckoned With...

Although weakened by manpower, morale, and potential resupply difficulties, the FMLN, in our view, retains sufficient destructive capacity to be a major problem for the government for years to come. We believe the insurgents can continue to carry out costly attacks—mostly harassment, raids, and ambushes—throughout most of the country. These will not defeat the armed forces, but they will continue to give the FMLN international credibility and a lever to press the government to react to the insurgents' political agenda. At the same time, the FMLN will be able to mobilize enough support to carry out some political activities, disseminate international propaganda, and issue peace initiatives that, together, will continue to exert strong pressures on the government.

Given their manpower and firepower constraints, the rebels are likely to continue to emphasize high-visibility attacks on soft targets such as the economic infrastructure, civil defense units, and political leaders. Attacks on military targets, although vital if the movement hopes to retain credibility, are apt to be mostly ambushes and harassments. We believe any attack on a major military facility is more likely to be a standoff bombardment, requiring fewer men and resources than a higher risk all-out assault. Although the FMLN is likely to attempt another series of large-scale urban attacks before the end of 1990, we do not believe it can sustain such actions long enough to present a military threat to the government.

The insurgents probably will make greater use of the SA-7s—their missile stockpiles and integration of the weapons permitting—in any future large-scale offensive. They could achieve a tactical military victory by using the SA-7s during a concerted attack against a key military target to prevent the Air Force from providing close air support to ground troops.

The FMLN is also likely to maintain its emphasis on political and diplomatic initiatives against the government, such as using front groups to mount rallies, demonstrations, and other antigovernment activity, particularly in the capital, where maximum media exposure is ensured. These actions, by themselves, however, are unlikely to inspire many Salvadorans to rally to the insurgent cause. Propaganda aimed at curtailing US aid and discrediting San Salvador with other foreign audiences will remain a high priority. For example, we expect new and provocative dialogue proposals, designed primarily to influence international opinion

External factors or blunders by the government are more likely to boost the FMLN's prospects than any concrete achievement by the rebels themselves. Highly publicized cases of human rights abuses by the armed forces, for example, could seriously damage the government's standing. Consequently, violent rebel acts designed to provoke a backlash by the armed forces will remain an integral part of the FMLN's strategy.

. . . But New Problems Loom

The FMLN's reliance on Cuba and Nicaragua for external support, once a source of strength for the insurgency, has become a potential vulnerability over the long term. Regardless of what compensatory adjustments Cuba and the FMLN might make, new supply efforts are unlikely to match the level of deliveries made possible by full Sandinista control over Nicaraguan territory. Communications and other administrative support probably also will be impaired, given the FMLN's heavy reliance on Nicaragua. In addition, the top rebel leaders, their staffs, and families must find new, secure residences. We believe this disruption of their external support network will lead to an eventual decline in their military capabilities. The FMLN, over the long term, may prove unable to sustain its current force levels and have to rely on more rudimentary weapons and tactics. Tougher, coordinated government interdiction could further disrupt insurgent logistics.

The FMLN also is likely to suffer a political backlash from events in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and Nicaragua. As Marxists, the FMLN commanders espouse a widely discredited ideology and, although they often present themselves as democratic nationalists, their vehement opposition to past elections and their long association with and dependence on Cuba are likely to make them appear increasingly anachronistic in a political-ideological sense.

We believe these pressures and the substantial military reverses experienced during the past year may lead some FMLN leaders to reassess their view of a negotiated settlement. Until recently, the rebels regarded talks with the government largely as a tactical maneuver to facilitate a total military victory. In a 1988 communique, for example, senior FMLN commander Joaquin Villalobos asserted that the desire of democracies to negotiate was a vulnerability the rebels could exploit. In our judgment, the FMLN's top leaders are increasingly inclined—if only to sustain the dialogue and keep their options open—to make proposals that will be regarded by most observers, especially those in Washington, as reasonable. Even so, some commanders continue to favor strongly a military solution and could launch independent attacks.

In any case, we expect a sharpening of divisions within the FMLN leadership. Such an exacerbation of existing personal and ideological rivalries—which could result in contradictions in the rebels' strategy and hamper their operations—is a vulnerability that could be exploited by the Salvadoran Government to divide, weaken, or fracture the movement and reduce its effectiveness. For example, the government could create turmoil among the rebel leaders through psychological operations designed to exploit the differences among the top five commanders.

Alternative Scenarios

The insurgency could be hurt seriously over the next few years if the FMLN and Cuba fail to adjust to the probable loss of free access to Nicaraguan territory. Not only could there be a precipitate drop in supplies, but the insurgents could also suffer command and control problems if they were unable to replicate communications networks. Under these circumstances, the FMLN's military capabilities could decline dramatically. This also could occur if the FMLN were to splinter. The insurgents would be hurt even more, perhaps fatally, in our judgment, if the Cuban regime withdrew its support for the insurgents, either as a result of the pressures mounting on Castro or because Fidel were replaced by a less aggressive leader.

Although current trends argue against a dramatic improvement in the FMLN's fortunes, such a turnabout could occur as a result of developments largely outside the insurgents' direct control. The most likely cause would be a drastic decline in Salvadoran military performance, perhaps prompted by a cut in US military aid or the emergence of extreme factionalism in the armed forces. The rebels also would benefit from a collapse of domestic support for the Salvadoran Government, which could be precipitated by several factors, including a widespread resurgence of death squad activity or the assassination of President Cristiani.